

SUNDAY, JULY 12, 1896.—COPYRIGHT, 1896, BY W. R. HEARST.

EIGHT HUNDRED NEEDLES IN HER BODY. TO PREVENT BEING BURIED ALIVE.

An X-Ray Photograph of This Remarkable Girl Enables the Doctors to See Them and Cut Them Out.

Out of the body of Melvina Morford, a healthy, rosy-cheeked girl of twenty-one years, more than 800 needles have been taken within the past seven years.

Was there ever a more startling statement than this? The girl is still healthy, her cheeks are still rosy and there is not a particle of the morbid in her temperament or her disposition. The source of her peculiar malady is as mysterious as the movements of the planets that lie beyond our vision. Yet, week after week and month after month these needles protrude from her flesh as if, like living bodies, they had lain there for many years until they were developed enough to creep out into the world.

The immediate suspicion of every physician who has been consulted in this case was that the girl had stuck the needles into her own skin, actuated by any one of a dozen hysterical motives. Strange to say, however, not one of these physicians held this belief after the third or fourth visit. When, after fruitless attempts to cure the girl of this needle-growing habit, they were asked what they thought of the case, they invariably shook their heads and answered:

"We can make nothing of it."

In the past week an attempt was made to solve this mystery by means of science's latest aid—the Roentgen rays. The result only complicated matters further. They found her flesh full of needles, and yet found no cause for them.

Melvina Morford lives at Sharon, Pa. Her father is dead, but her mother, who is almost heartbroken over her daughter's affliction, tells this story:

When her daughter was fifteen years old, while playing in the house one day with some companions she stepped upon a paper of needles, a number of which penetrated her flesh. Crying with pain she ran to her mother, who found one of the needles still protruding from the foot. This she extracted, and immediately sent for a doctor to take out the others. The doctor, however, advised her to let them be as they were, saying that the operation of cutting them out might cause serious inflammation, while if they were let alone they would probably soon come out of their own accord. As a matter of fact, the wound soon healed and the girl had almost forgotten the incident when, about six months later, she felt severe pains in the calf of her right leg.

An examination showed that the needles were working their way through the skin and it required but little exertion to draw them out. This incident, too, had also been forgotten, when a year later, while on a visit to Ohio with her mother, the girl felt shooting pains in her right arm. In great alarm her mother returned with her to Sharon and begged Dr. F. L. Burrows to make a careful examination of the girl. The doctor, upon squeezing the flesh in various parts of her body, found that the girl writhed in pain. Selecting the shoulder to begin with, he had little difficulty in locating a needle under the skin, which he promptly removed. From that date to this Dr. Burrows has extracted over 800 needles from this girl's body.

While possessing perfect health this young woman is of slender build, and rather fragile looking. She is inclined to be nervous, and is exceedingly sensitive to external impressions. Her fortitude, however, is perfectly amazing. The operation of cutting out these needles is exceedingly painful, but she has borne it a hundred times without wincing. At times the pain must have been excruciating, yet throughout her agony she maintained a composure as wonderful as that of the religious fanatics who, with a smile upon their faces, submit to flagellation.

The needles, in most cases, made their appearance by slow degrees. A slight elevation of the surface of the skin was usually the first indication of their presence. This was followed by shooting pains, and at times by acute inflammation. In these cases, however, it was an easy matter to puncture the skin and extract the needle before it caused much damage.

At times, however, the presence of the needle was felt by the girl when it was still deeply imbedded in her flesh, and then it was that all her heroism was called into play. Dr. Burrows would then have to lance the flesh and grope about among countless sensitive nerves, lacerating muscles and other tissues until he obtained a grip upon the needle. When, finally, it was drawn forth, the flesh presented a horribly mutilated appearance. These needles, you must bear in mind, were frequently extracted in this fashion from every portion of her body, and when, as sometimes happened, a dozen made themselves felt on the same day, the girl was frequently confined to her bed from sheer loss of blood.

The needles themselves were the ordinary steel instrument used for fine sewing. They varied in size and were usually corroded when they came out. It was only from the extent of the rust that Dr. Burrows was able to form any idea of how long they had been in the flesh.

At various times Dr. Burrows kept the girl under strict surveillance, in such circumstances as would have been practically impossible for her to have stuck the needles into herself. In spite of this he would in a few days be compelled to cut out of the flesh needles that were still shining bright, which must have found their way into the flesh during one of these periods of observation.

Most of the needles have come out of her right arm, and as a result that member presents a horribly scarred appearance. There is a long red scar upon her neck and several upon her thighs to mark the spot where needles were extracted.

Of course no one doubts for a moment that all these needles were stuck into the flesh, but it is the manner in which it is done that mystifies the physicians. The girl herself stoutly denies that she sticks them into her skin.

"Why should I do it?" she has said time and time again. "It is all I can do to bear the pain of having them cut out, without torturing myself by sticking them in. The notoriety of the thing is enough to drive a person mad of itself. I have not the slightest idea of how they get into my flesh."

The physicians have made numerous attempts to trap her into a confession of duplicity, but as yet they have not succeeded. They found that she was right-handed, and that she was exceedingly unskillful with her other hand. Nevertheless the right forearm at the elbow is almost covered with scars of former wounds. Her friends have advanced the theory that she swallows the needles, but the physicians declare that this is an impossibility. To swallow 800 needles, they say, would have killed any living animal.

The most plausible theory is that in moments of mental aberration she sticks the needles into herself, and that these attacks of temporary insanity last long enough to enable the pain to disappear. The girl would then be totally unconscious of what she had done, and all accusations of truthfulness would be unjust.

More than two hundred of the needles were taken from the right arm, and it was here the first test of the Roentgen rays was made. A well-known Cleveland scientist of the Case School of Applied Science arranged the apparatus and assisted Dr. Burrows in the experiment.

The arm was exposed for forty-one minutes. A Crookes tube of five inches diameter was used and a strong current was applied. A number of physicians had been invited to witness the experiment, and considerable interest was manifested in the proceedings.

When the radiograph was developed the bones of the arm stood out in dim, but not indistinct, outlines. Surrounding them was a number of fine black lines.

"Those," said Dr. Burrows, "must be needles."

Selecting a spot near the elbow where the radiograph showed one of these lines, Dr. Burrows made an incision in the girl's arm, and, after probing for several seconds, felt a needle. The flesh was terribly torn before the needle was extracted, but all those who witnessed the operation declared that it was a wonderful success.

In less than fifteen minutes Dr. Burrows extracted nine more needles, most of them, judging from their corroded appearance, having been imbedded in the tissue for quite some time. Owing to the great loss of blood it was decided to postpone further probing until the patient recovered from the shock of the painful operation she had gone through.

Subsequent photographs of the rest of her body showed the same little black lines where the needles are located.

When asked to explain this phenomenon, Dr. Burrows said:

"I would not like to give my opinion in the case. I am much elated, however, over the success of the experiment with the X rays. Formerly it was a very difficult matter to locate the foreign substances, but now, as you have seen, it is very simple. Needles which in all probability would have remained in the girl's flesh to the end of her days can now be extracted. Where they all come from I do not know."



From an X-Ray Photograph of Miss Morford.



The Boston Woman Who Narrowly Escaped Being Buried Alive.
FROM "BURIED ALIVE," A MEDICAL TREATISE, BY DR. FRANZ HARTMANN.

A Movement Begun in England for a Law to Compel Doctors to Make Positive Tests of Death.

The startling number of cases of premature burial that have come to light in England in the past six months has led to a movement which bids fair, before the close of the century, to exercise a powerful influence upon all the civilized world. To heighten the intensity of the feeling that has been created there has sprung up a terrible suspicion, based upon authentic reports, that the cases of premature burial known to the world form but a small percentage of all those that have really happened.

It seems almost incredible that, with the world's civilization and its many centuries of enlightenment it should have remained for this year to see the inauguration of a movement whose object is to prevent the greatest mental and physical agony known to the human mind. Yet, so it is; and even to-day the movement has not spread outside of England.

In the humdrum of daily existence it is natural to suspect that the frequency of this occurrence is greatly exaggerated. Yet those men who inaugurated the movement in England had their attention called to the subject by the following gruesome headlines in English newspapers, all published within a period of ten days:

"BURIED ALIVE."
"A GREWSOME NARRATIVE."
"PREMATURE BURIAL."
"MISTAKEN FOR DEAD."
"A WOMAN'S AWFUL EXPERIENCE."
"ALMOST BURIED WHILE ALIVE."
"A WOMAN BURIED ALIVE."
"REVIVIFICATION AFTER BURIAL."
"A LADY NEARLY BURIED ALIVE."
"SCOTCH FROM ANOTHER COFFIN."
"THE DEAD ALIVE."

The greatest horror that the human mind can picture is that of being buried alive. The most terrible death by drowning, burning or mangling almost fades into insignificance by the side of the prospect of being buried alive. The agony, of course, would be of short duration, but, even though it lasted only two minutes, it would, in its intensity, contain a world of misery and anguish too horrible to contemplate. The want of air would soon bring unconsciousness, but until that moment how awful would be the powerless struggle!

"It may be asserted without hesitation," wrote Edgar Allan Poe, "that no event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremacies of bodily and mental distress as is burial before death. The unendurable oppression of the lungs, the stifling fumes of the damp earth, the clinging to the death garments, the rigid embrace of the narrow house, the blackness of the absolute night, the silence like a sea that overwhelms, the unseen but palpable presence of the Conqueror—these things, with thoughts of the air and grass above, with memory of dear friends who would fly to save us if but informed of our fate, and with consciousness that of this fate they can never be informed; that our hopeless portion is that of the redly dead; these considerations, I say, carry into the heart, which still palpitates, a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil. We know of nothing so agonizing upon earth—we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost hell."

Is it not strange that with this horror staring us in the face for all these ages that no attempt has been made to avoid the risk of the actual occurrence? In all civilized countries burial is performed upon the certificate of a physician, who declares therein that the person who is about to be buried is dead. His reasons for believing that death has actually occurred have never been required, and yet it is upon this that the possibilities of premature burial depend.

There is but one successful and perfect test of the presence of death, and that is advanced decay. All other single tests have been known at times to fail. The heart has stopped beating, or breathing has ceased, or the body has turned cold, or any one of a dozen other signs of death has been observed, and yet life has not been extinct. The object of the present movement in England is to compel physicians to state when they grant death certificates just what tests they made to convince themselves that death had really occurred.

"If this were done," say the supporters of the movement, "and the doctor was obliged to state on the face of the certificate what were the indications on which he based the assurance that death had taken place, there would be little or no risk of burial alive. Even the most careless practitioner would hardly like to say that he had found absolute proof that death had taken place when in fact he had not. It would be better to cut the carotid artery or put a steel needle through the heart, even at the risk of killing a few entranced subjects, than to bury alive one man in a million."

The scheme of making sure by cutting an artery or digging a needle into the heart would probably meet with but little approbation in this country. In the suggestion as to the report of the physician who grants the death certificate there is everything to commend. It is sensible and humane.

Cremation solves the matter, but does it in a rather unsatisfactory fashion. While it presents no way of determining whether the subject about to be cremated is alive or not, it precludes all possibility of his ever returning to life after he is once put into the retort. The temperature in this furnace ranges from 1,500 to 2,000 degrees, creating an atmosphere the slightest inhalation of which would, even in a healthy being, cause instant death.

There are men who look upon the risk of premature burial as a possibility to class with the possibility of the earth being baked to clay by an increased activity of the sun, or by the impact of a comet. It needs but the most superficial inquiry into the subject, however, to convince one that these cases, while not of common occurrence, have happened with appalling regularity year after year, as far back as the records go. Some time ago Dr. Franz Hartmann, of Boston, issued a book entitled "Buried Alive," in which he recited all instances of premature burial, signs of activity found in the coffin after it had been exhumed, and of curious instances where, by the merest chance, the horrible fate of premature burial was averted.

The most curious case in his list is that of a young woman, who was actually prepared for the grave while perfectly conscious of all that was going on around her. She knew that she was lying in a coffin, she recognized the voices of her relatives and friends in the room, yet she was powerless to move.

She could not stretch her limbs, open her eyes, or even use her voice. It was only when her long-continued mental agony produced copious perspiration that the mourners suspected that life was not extinct. A physician was summoned, and within a few hours the young woman had regained full control of her faculties. This woman owed her life to the fact that her trance, or cataleptic condition, had not extended itself to her brain. Had she been unconscious, as well as physically helpless, the recovery might have taken place under the earth, and of the speechless agony that would have followed if the world would never have known.

This is only one of the several hundred instances. The medical records are full of them. Go to any cemetery and they will tell you gruesome stories of coffins that were taken out of the ground and opened, revealing bodies that had turned upon their faces, that had torn out their hair, or showed other signs of ghastly self-mutilation, signs of frantic struggles during that brief period of consciousness that intervened between recovery and true death.

It will be very difficult, even in the face of all the indisputable evidence that the premature burial is constantly happening, to bring Americans to such a point of active interest in the matter that they will be willing to induce any such radical measures as are suggested.

There is an almost incredible shrinking among Americans from the mere thought of converting the horrible doubt into certainty.

The process might, to be sure, in maybe one case in a thousand, mean the taking of life. But the instant and painless death which would do away with all uncertainty is a piece of Christian charity, compared with which it is inhuman cruelty to condemn the victim to such an awakening as must befall in case life still lingers in the seemingly lifeless frame.

Truly, it is a painful subject, and one that repels all curiosity; yet it is important—awfully, terribly important—and when the mind once grasps the full horror of that thought, "buried alive," it will concede that this movement in England is a humanitarian one, which, it is to be hoped, will arouse interest in this country.